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ABSTRACT

Experiential learning techniques, widely used in the United States in the field of intercultural communication, can be modified for use by individuals from other cultures. The experiential learning approach involves the use of exercises that parallel real life situations, involve all participants, require active participation, provide instant feedback, and are flexible. The approach works primarily on the affective level and is based on enabling individuals to learn how to learn. Among its basic assumptions are that an open, supportive, and nonevaluative environment should be developed; that the responsibility for learning rests ultimately on the learner; and that experiential learning builds on the experience of the individual. Experiential instruction in intercultural communication aims at increasing understanding of other cultures, developing skills for effective cross-cultural interactions, and promoting intercultural communication. A number of simulation exercises and games have been developed for these purposes. (Sixteen simulation exercises are listed; playing time, suggested number and educational level of participants, and a brief description are included for each exercise. A bibliography of relevant materials is also provided.) (GW)

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PERSPECTIVES ON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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PERSPECTIVES ON EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION*

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(This paper was prepared for presentation at the Tenth Annual International Convention of the Communication Association of the Pacific, June 10-11, Tokyo, Japan)

Introduction

Since the 1960's experiential learning as an educational concept has gained increasing acceptance among teachers and practitioners of intercultural communication. Among the more common forms of experiential learning techniques are simulation exercises, games, role playing, case studies and field trips.

The increased use of experiential learning methods in instruction and in training in applied communication has created a potential learning dimension which has not yet been fully understood. Consequently, though learning materials have increased rapidly in quantity and have become more readily accessible to teachers and trainers, serious questions have arisen concerning their purposes, application, and long term effectiveness. Such questions appear to have especially serious implications, in the field of intercultural communication since some of the experiential approaches that have proven to be very popular in the United States cannot be transferred into the context of most other cultures without certain modifications. This is especially true when we consider that experiential learning is biased towards individual expression and the articulation of strong emotions. Still, it is possible for individuals from other cultures to learn the fundamental techniques of experiential instruction and to gain some experience in adapting them to different cultural and learning contexts.

There are many types of experiential instructional techniques. In this paper, however, the discussion will focus on the utilization of the simulated structured exercises and games that are widely used in the United States. However, the

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*This paper is an expansion of a paper that was previously presented at the Fourth Annual Conference of the Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research (SIETAR), in Phoenix, Arizona on February 22-26, 1978.

general statements about the nature of experiential instructional techniques that are made in this paper apply equally well to the other types of experiential learning activities.

Definition of the Term

Experiential learning refers to the process of learning by doing. The learner is expected to be an active participant in his own instruction. It is through active participation that the individual can internalize the learning experience. There is research evidence which proves that such participation increases the rate of learning. Such learning comes from the individual's insights and reactions to the learning situation. The goal in experiential learning is for the student to have a concrete, personal, observable and subjective learning experience. Thus, a high value is placed on reaching insights about oneself. In this process, the learner is assisted by the facilitator and by the other learners. They provide the constructive feedback which enables the individual to reflect upon his/her communicative behavior. Thus, experiential learning fosters a cooperative venture between the learner, the facilitator and the other members of the group.

The pedagogical structure of this approach includes semi-structured, open-ended and open-minded exercises in which there are not necessarily right or wrong answers to a problem. What is important is the experience of experimenting with various approaches to a problem under relatively controlled situations. Still, it is expected that the learner will be able to make use of what he has learned by this means in his everyday life. Thus one should not make the mistake of assuming that what happens under these laboratory-like conditions is not "real". Furthermore, the emotions that are engendered during the exercises are also very real and so they must be dealt with seriously. That is why it is necessary that the facilitator is well trained to cope with the unexpected and unpredictable responses of the participants.

Some general characteristics of the experiential instructional approach are: (1) It parallels real life situations. (2) It involves all the participants. (3) It requires active participation. (4) It provides instant feedback. (5) It is flexible.

The structured exercises and activities that constitute an integral part of the instructional content of experiential learning simulate real life situations and events. They are designed to recreate within a controlled atmosphere, real life experiences in a very short and compact period. By the very nature of the exercises or games one can not avoid involvement. Since they occur in interactive settings where the participants have the opportunity to give and receive feedback, they are able to improve upon or practice new communication behaviors.

Some important aspects of the experiential learning approach which distinguish it from other instructional approaches are that (1) It works primarily on the affective level. (2) An attempt is made to enable individuals to learn how to learn skills, values, attitudes and habits; how to orient themselves to different contexts; how to acquire insights into the context of problem solving. The didactic mode of learning focuses on the cognitive aspects and knowledge is usually assessed by performance on tests requiring written responses.

Basic Assumptions in Experiential Learning

When the choice is made to utilize the experiential learning approach, there are some basic assumptions that should be understood:

1. The most conducive climate for experiential learning is an open, supportive and non-evaluative environment.
2. The responsibility for learning rests ultimately on the learner.
3. Everything that the learner learns is assumed to be important to him/her.
4. Learning that is experiential permits the individual to experience the exercise cognitively and emotionally without prior knowledge of what he/she is supposed to be learning.

5. Experiential learning builds upon the concrete, personal and unique experience of the individual.

6. The way games and exercises are structured is an important consideration if maximum growth and learning are to be achieved.

Applications in Intercultural Communication

The primary objectives of experiential instruction in intercultural communication are: 1. To help the learner increase his/her understanding of other cultures. 2. To develop skills for effective cross-cultural interaction. 3. To promote intercultural communication between persons of different cultures.

Simulation exercises and games such as BaFa BaFa, Culture Contact, International Relations Game, East-West Game and others can help students explore, expand and deepen their knowledge of intercultural communication. When the students perform these exercises they may experience almost the full range of thoughts and feelings that would normally be present were they to visit other cultures and participate in the daily activities of the inhabitants, or to discover the difficulty of being objective as they listened to ideas they did not share. As they become aware of potential conflictual situations they are encouraged to try to prevent or minimize them. They are aided in their efforts by the facilitator or instructor in an atmosphere more supportive and less threatening than an actual foreign experience. In this instance, the instructor has a great responsibility for the creation and maintenance of an atmosphere that promotes meaningful learning and growth.

In the discussions that follow the exercises, students can reflect upon the explanations for their behavior and try new ways of conducting their intercultural interactions. Furthermore, their actual performance of the exercises and the processing of the knowledge gained after the games are concluded constitute a multisensory experience that reinforces the learning process. The challenge of discovering what they are expected to learn often results in students taking considerably greater initiative and responsibility in attaining their intended objectives.

Another advantage of the experiential instruction approach in intercultural communication is that it can be easily combined with traditional methods of instruction and enhance further learning in the course.

A List of Simulation Games and Exercises

The nature of the intended experience in intercultural education and training generally dictates the choice of the game or the simulated exercise. That choice is also dependent upon the skill of the facilitator or trainer in using various instruments or procedures. The following is a list of games and exercises that offer a range of useful possibilities. They were selected on the basis of the author's familiarity with them, and of the recommendation of colleagues who have had experience with their use.

AID TO MINORIANS, (In Intercultural Sourcebook)

Participants divided into two groups (Minorians and Majorians) with the latter equipped to give "aid" to the former. Focuses on feelings emerging from the giving and receiving of aid between cultures and nations. (1 1/2 - 3 hours, 8-40 adults).

ALBATROSS, (In Beyond Experience, Experiment in International Living, Brattleboro, Vermont, in press.)

Demonstrates a radically different culture to players who remain partly participants and partly observers. Strong feelings about the nature of the culture are stimulated and make for fruitful discussion. (1 1/2 - 3 hours, 3-30 high school through adult participants).

BAFA BAFA, (Simile II, 1150 Silverado, San Diego, California).

Group divided into two to learn different cultural behaviors (Alphas and Betas). They visit back and forth to experience and attempt to learn the other culture. (1 1/2 - 3 hours, 15-40 high school through adult participants).

BALDICER, (John Knox Press, Atlanta, Georgia)

Centered on food distribution and economic development, participants form groups and engage in crosscultural cooperation and face the dilemmas of economic growth and cross-national competition. (1 1/2 - 3 hours, 10-40 high school through adult participants).

BLACKS AND WHITES, (Psychology Today)

Designed to provide participants with an awareness of what is involved in being black and poor and to suggest the nature of ghetto conditions. (1 1/2 - 3 hours, adult players).

BODY TALK, (Psychology Today)

The game focuses upon the realm of nonverbal communication and is designed to heighten participant awareness of their own non-verbal behavior. (1 1/2 - 3 hours, adults).

CRISIS, (Simile II)

A simulation of international conflict, in which players serve on teams representing one of six fictional nations. The nations vary in strength and military capacity and collectively must resolve situations essential to their mutual well-being. (2 - 4 hours, 25-35 junior high school through adults).

CULTURE CONTACT, (Abt Associates Inc., 55 Wheeler Street, Cambridge, Mass.)

A role-play game designed to focus upon the sorts of misunderstanding and potential conflict which can arise when a trading expedition docks at an island inhabited by a pre-industrial society. (1 1/2 - 3 hours, 20-30 upper elementary through adults.)

EAST-WEST GAME or "The Emporor's Pot" (In Intercultural Sourcebook, Volume I, "Cross-Cultural Training Methodologies", Society for Focus on cultural assumptions and values as one group attempts to gain the "national treasure" of the other. (1 1/2 - 3 hours, 18-20 junior high school through adult participants).

FIRO B, (Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation)

Designed to measure an individual's expressed behavior towards others and the behavior he wants from others, from the dimensions of inclusion, control, affection. (1 1/2 - 3 hours, adults).

IDE-GO, (in Intercultural Sourcebook).

Participants divide into two culture groups, the behavioral norms of which simulate North American and Latin American Cultures. Provides insight into interaction processes between North and South Americans. (1 1/2 - 3 hours, 8-46 junior high school through adult participants).

INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS GAME, (Stanford Institute for Applied Intercultural Communication)

Explores relations between two neighboring countries of Franistan and Germania each with different backgrounds, values, levels of economic independence and social composition. By negotiating on a specific problem, individuals see more clearly the need to consider the other's point of view. (2 - 3 hours, high school through adult participants).

LUMP SUM, (In A Manual of Structural Exercises, Weeks, Pedersen, and Brislin, Society for Intercultural Education, Training and Research, Pittsburgh, 1977).

Four groups negotiate over the allocation of a sum of money given to them. Sum must be allocated within specified time or it is lost. Communication, conflict and cooperation issues emerge strongly. (3 hours, 12-48 high school through adult participants).

SOMTAN EXERCISE, (In Intercultural Sourcebook).

Three culture groups (dominant and two minorities or foreign groups) in conflict over behavior of children in dominant culture's school system. Participants play representatives of cultures in meeting called to discuss the problems. Focus on cultural stereo-typing, differing perceptions, and cross-cultural conflict. (1 1/2 - 3 hours, 9-30 adults).

STAR POWER, (Similie II).

Different status groups compete for wealth and power. Participants experience impace of social and economic inequality. (2-3 hours, 18-25 junior high through adult participants).

XIAN GAME, (In Intercultural Sourcebook).

Couple attempts to find cultural key to visiting an exotic country. Focuses on cultural/perceptual differences. (1 1/2 - 3 hours, 4 players, unlimited observers).

** NOTE: The number of hours indicated for each game includes discussion of information generated from the activities.

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